

Globecomm launches 'maritime Skype' service

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Globecomm Maritime has introduced Access Chat Plus, an optimised chat and video conferencing application designed for maritime satellite communications, offering 'marinised' version of services similar to those available via Skype.

The company says that Access Chat Plus will provide maritime users with a means to make video calls and chat live over satellite using "a fraction of the data and at a fraction of the cost" of shore side applications like Skype.

The application comes in two versions - Access Chat provides instant messaging and voice calling, while Access Chat Plus provides the same with the addition of video conferencing.

Both applications are no more than 1Mb in size and can be installed on any Windows or Android device, with an Apple OS version due in Q2 2013.

Either application may be loaded to a USB stick, enabling them to be used across

multiple devices, and can be installed without the need for proprietary ship management software.

Both Access Chat and Access Chat Plus are available in a range of pricing options for corporate and crew use, with customised pricing available when the service is bundled with Globecomm Maritime airtime service contracts.

"There is a monthly subscription fee, and then usage will be charged at the ship's normal airtime billing rate. So if they are using VSAT, then there is zero billing for usage," Martin Killian, Globecomm Maritime, told *Digital Ship*.

Mr Killian says that the video conferencing service requires a minimum bandwidth of 40 kbps, but that the company recommends 80 kbps to provide an experience comparable to other video chat software.

This would mean that a minute of video chat would create data traffic of between 0.25MB and 0.5MB per minute, for which the user would be charged at the

ship's contracted data rate.

This would represent a major improvement on something like Skype, which will consume all of the bandwidth available to it, though use of the Globecomm video conferencing service would also still need to be controlled - for example, a single video call on a FleetBroadband 500 would use 10 to 20 per cent of the advertised 432 kbps link (which in practice will often be considerably lower).

As such, Mr Killian suggests that video calls be scheduled to avoid connectivity conflicts.

"We offer an application that does not consume all the available bandwidth on a broadband device, so there is room to still run other applications in the background," he told us.

"Other video chat applications would consume 100 per cent of the available FB (FleetBroadband) bandwidth, so this is a huge advantage for Access Chat Plus."

"We do expect that Captains and ship managers will set up certain times when

crew can make calls - Sunday afternoons, for example - and schedule their business application usage at other times so as not to be competing for bandwidth."

Trevor Whitworth, senior vice president sales & marketing, Globecomm Maritime, notes that cost has been the major issue preventing services like these becoming widespread in the maritime industry, and that he expects these services to soon be as popular as their equivalents on shore.

"Demand for video conferencing and instant messaging has experienced rapid growth, but while land-based users have become accustomed to its convenience, shipboard staff need tools that are designed for the constraints of satellite communications," he said.

"Voice and video conferencing applications use a great deal of bandwidth and that makes it very expensive for seafarers. We identified the need for a tool that gives ships the same functionality but keeps cost under control."